

Remembrance Day 2019

gird up your loins, ye prophet souls,
proclaim the day is near :

4 The day in whose clear-shining light
all wrong shall stand revealed,
when justice shall be throned in might,
and every hurt be healed ;

Prophets indeed prayed for that day. 'The day of the Lord' in the Old Testament may originally have referred to festival day, to one of the three principal pilgrimage feasts – a day when the nation was at unity, when like our Christmas, society's divisions and ills are set aside for a moment, when we try not to talk about Brexit, when we turn to the Queen to bring us all together and when to try to ensure that there are charitable endeavours to feed the hungry and give shelter to the homeless. But some of the prophets learnt to despise their festival days, foreshadowing today's Christmas-haters. Society in their eyes was just too awful, too unjust, too faithless. So they looked to another day of the Lord, a day when all would be put right by a final intervention or appearing of God himself. In that darkest of Old Testament books, the story of Job - the innocent, god-fearing man on whom every calamity and misfortune descends – the anguish of human suffering is explored and full rein is given to the rage of Job against his condition, and indeed against the God who allowed all of it to happen. Chapter upon chapter of unmitigated gloom and uncensored protest against the almighty has just one tiny pin-prick of light, one brief obstinate clinging on to hope – the words we heard in our OT reading, words familiar to our culture principally because they have been set to music. We hear them as being about the Messiah:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.

I'm not sure Job quite had in mind the one we see as fulfilling this text and I'm not sure he uttered it in the serene way that Handel's soprano does. I think he is thumping the table at the time: I damn well know that I am in the right – and when in my flesh (because I barely have any skin left) I have my day in court with God I will tell him what I think and will be vindicated.

In our NT reading, Paul's Thessalonians readers have been alarmed, 'shaken in mind' he says, because they have heard it said that the 'the day of the Lord' has already been and gone. They had somehow missed it and were consigned to endure the apocalyptic events of their day without hope. Perhaps a bit of historical background would help.

The believers in Thessalonica were Jewish but, unlike in some of the other places where Paul preached, the majority of the Jewish community was pretty anti the new Jesus sect. The situation for Judaism in their homeland was precarious and volatile. Violent messianic uprisings and different political-cum-religious Jewish parties – united only in their ungovernability - had left the Romans seriously annoyed and intent on crushing rebellion. There was a history of threat to the religious integrity of the Temple. Fear of foreign powers polluting the sanctuary had run deep from the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century BC who had erected a statue of Zeus there and sacrificed a pig on the altar. In AD 40 the mad Roman emperor Caligula ordered that the Temple should be a place of worship to him as god and his statue set up in the sanctuary. Fortunately he had a more diplomatic governor in Syria who delayed enacting the order until in the end it was

rescinded. In the year 63 the Roman general Pompey besieged Jerusalem and took control of the Temple. He marched into the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could go once a year, but the next day restored the Temple to the priesthood who cleansed and purged it of its pagan violation. So the idea of a lawless one who would march into the Temple and declare himself God was only one step further in the fearful imaginations of faithful 1st century Jews, presaged by what had already taken place. Paul's message to the Thessalonian Jesus-following Jews was both good and bad news: good in that they hoped for day was yet to come, but bad because things in their national and spiritual home city were going to get a whole lot worse – and indeed they did. The epic eyewitness account of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Roman Jewish historian Josephus is jaw-droppingly horrific.

Today we focus on the apocalyptic events of our own national history in the past 105 years. The two minute silence we will join in was first observed a hundred years ago and today we remember the fallen not only of the Great War but of the Second World War and subsequent conflicts.

Back in September we marked the 80th anniversary of Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war and six years of the most extreme suffering and loss of life that the world has ever seen. Between 70 and 85 million lives were lost, 3-4 times as many as in the first war. They died in battlefields, at sea, in the air, in the desert, in concentration camps, in bombarded cities, in ghettos, building railways, wearing parachutes, by bullets, shrapnel wounds, shells, gas, nuclear radiation, fire, drowning and disease. 70 million or more Jobs, many of them who also had their skin destroyed, crying out for that latter day when some sense will be given to it all, some justice done and where 'wrong shall all

stand revealed... and every hurt be healed'. Our great wars had their prophets – before the first came G K Chesterton, best known now for daytime TV mysteries solved by Father Brown, but in his day a Christian intellectual as renowned as his secular friend, George Bernard Shaw. We will be singing his prophetic hymn shortly. Perhaps the greatest prophet of the second war was W B Yeats who died the year it began. Read again that famous poem, written at the end of the first war but surely prophetic of the second, called 'The Second Coming':

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.*

The apocalyptic conditions of the two wars bring us back to the apocalyptic setting of much of the New Testament, and hence to the longing for the Second Coming which was wrapped into the existing hope of the day of the Lord.

That hope of a day of reckoning and restoring things to their right order perhaps lay behind the significance of those days that marked the closing

episodes of the 1939-45 war. This year saw the 75th commemoration of D-Day; that will be followed next year by remembrances of VE-Day and VJ-Day – days that will recall the victory of good over forces of tyranny and racial supremacy, the end of hostilities and the beginning of a new order. In their way all of those days have been an anticipation of the Day of which I have been speaking, but in the end they have been incomplete and have led us to look to further days when all will be made well, much as in our era those who have been longing for Brexit have had their disappointments as one B-Day has led to another. And now we have election day when all will be made well, will it not? Perhaps, like me, you fear echoes of Yeats:

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Today our political leaders are gathered together with the Queen, God save her, side by side, divisions briefly forgotten, as we remember the brutal cost of that passionate intensity which is not held in orbit by the falconer, by the one who calls us and tames our wildness to nobler purpose.

Tomorrow, it will be back to the campaign, God help us. Let's pray that the lessons of today will inform the tenor of the utterances of tomorrow. Let's pray for our nation and its leaders. Let's echo Chesterton's litany:

From all that terror teaches,

from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord !

So here we go – 5 weeks until election day. Strap yourselves in. But fear not, because two weeks after that is our day of the Lord, it's Christmas, when we might well need Her Majesty again to bring us all together, and she can do so not least because she looks to the falconer at the centre to keep things together. She brings us back year by year to the Prince of Peace, the one Christians recognise as the Redeemer, who once walked this earth, who died to share in our sorrow and bear our sin, and who now lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.